

Kenai to host Alaska Regional FireWise Workshop, April 25-27

by Doug Newbould

We Alaskans have been quite fortunate. Despite all of the major wildfires this state has experienced in the past century, only one destroyed homes to the magnitude we saw in New Mexico and Montana last year. In 1996 the Miller's Reach Fire destroyed 454 homes west of Wasilla. Amazingly, no humans lost their lives during the chaos of that incident. We may not be so lucky next time. As a member of the wildland fire community in Alaska, I have heard it said many times, "It's not a question of—if a major wildfire will devastate a community somewhere in the state, it's a question of—when."

As the population of Alaska grows and development expands, more and more people are building their homes and businesses out in the wildlands, where they can experience the natural tranquility, the beauty and the wildness of this great land we live in. It's just the American way. It happened in California, it has happened in the Rockies and it's happening here. This condition of the landscape—where development occurs in traditionally natural areas, is known as the Wildland/Urban Interface or WUI.

Nationally, the occurrence of wildfire in the WUI is increasing, and many homes are lost each year. But there is hope. We have seen many homes left standing, basically undamaged after the passage of a wildfire. These survivors generally possess some common characteristics: defensible or survivable space, fire resistant building materials and design, a reliable water supply and adequate road access. Fire prevention and mitigation efforts around the country are beginning to make a difference. That is what the FireWise Community Action Program is all about.

FireWise is a new paradigm, a new standard, a new way to approach development in the wildland/urban interface. It is a way that homeowners and business owners can take responsibility for their own lives and property, a way they can survive and quickly recover

from the devastating effects of wildfire. It is a process that city planners and real estate developers can use to design a fire-safe community. It's a way that villages can retrofit their structures and treat the surrounding vegetation to survive those massive black spruce fires in the Interior.

This is where you come in. The Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group has partnered with the Kenai Peninsula Borough, to host the Alaska Regional FireWise Communities Workshop in Kenai on April 25-27, 2001. This sixteen-hour workshop is designed to bring homeowners, planners, architects, builders, insurance professionals, financial institutions and fire managers together to learn the process, to interact with each other and to build people networks. We hope to have one hundred Alaskans participate in the workshop, which will be held at the Pacific Rim Institute of Safety and Management in Kenai.

To register call Sharon Roesch at (907) 260-4222. The cost of the workshop is \$100, which includes meals. If you need lodging, the total cost of the workshop with room and board is \$275. There are limited scholarships available. The workshop is filling up quickly. Only about fifty slots remain. There are plenty of "idealistic" Alaskan fire professionals planning to attend. We need more homeowners, especially those who would be willing to share FireWise with their neighbors. We also need more builders, developers, planners, insurance representatives, financial institution professionals, business owners, landscape companies and environmental professionals to make the workshop the best it can be. Will you join us?

Doug Newbould is the Fire Management Officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, fire management or FireWise, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.